



Lifetime Learning

Kona Macphee is the woman behind Crieff Cloverleaf, and she's a self-confessed skills junkie
Interview by: Sheonagh Ravensdale



How did you start riding?

Completely accidentally! I was a student in Sydney and was working as a waitress three nights a week. I was living in a rough part of the city, walking home from the station late at night. My boss said this wasn't a good thing to do and why didn't I buy a motorbike? I didn't have any money but got hold of a little 100cc Honda. Riding became an obsession and I soon progressed to a 250 Super Dream – I'd never even thought of riding a bike before, but now I was hooked.



What do you have now?

I've not actually owned that many bikes, but I've got three now: an old R1100 GS, a Honda CRF 250L and a Yamaha Tracer 700. Our little garage is full and any more would probably mean divorce!

Favourite is usually the one I'm riding at the moment, and the CRF is perfect off-road. I have ridden off-road on a BMW GS but I feel more comfortable on a smaller, more nimble bike which I can pick up. The Tracer 700 is lovely on the road – not particularly fancy or good looking, but it's such great fun to ride, really flicky. It's very willing, but not so powerful that there's loads of power you can never use – I like to feel that I am using the bike's capabilities – it's my happy place.

You do your own maintenance don't you?

After leaving school I thrashed around for about three years. Started a music composition degree and dropped that, then read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance which gave me the idea of becoming a bike mechanic – I did actually become an apprentice vehicle mechanic in Australia. I had about 25 years without riding when I moved to the UK and had a family, but then the same idea resurfaced and I enrolled on a motorcycle maintenance course at West Lothian College near Edinburgh. It was a great course, a year of weekly sessions which went through everything, ending with a City & Guilds. So yes, I do maintain all my bikes. Ewan McAdam, who still runs the course, was a brilliant teacher with the patience of a saint.

My day job is writing software which is very difficult to get 100% right, but mechanical jobs, like replacing the wheel on a bike, are much simpler – if you've got it right, it's right. When mechanical jobs throw up difficulties it's just about being patient and solving problems. I look after my husband Patrick's bikes as well.

Tell us about the 'right to repair'

Mechanics are now becoming deskilled because the job is increasingly about throwing faulty components away and fitting a new one rather than repairing. I'm concerned that the industry is heading towards people having to have their bikes serviced at dealers – the right to repair is really important.

The PCP (Personal Contract Plan) model is all part of it, because most of them actually prohibit doing your own maintenance, and the pressure is to trade in for a new bike every three years. Buying a new bike every three years is also environmentally disastrous because, as we all know, a huge part of any vehicle's CO2 emissions is bound up with its manufacture – it's just insane. We live in a throwaway culture, but fixing things can be very satisfying – I was never prouder than when I mended my washing machine and my paper shredder.

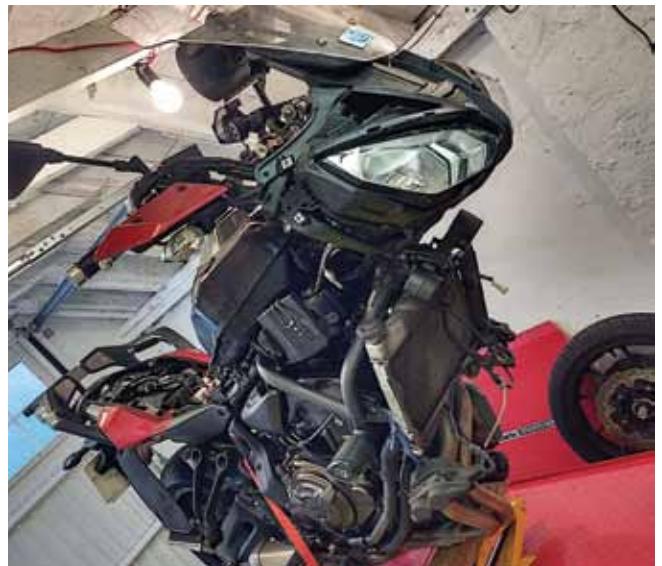
Ride solo or in a group?

That really depends on the group. I do love riding solo and I've done lots of trips where I've been on my own, just enjoying the riding. I quite often do a long trip solo, like taking back roads down



Above: CRF250 L has opened up the world of off-road

Below: Tracer 700 (here in mid-overhaul by its owner) is, "lovely on the road."



to Wales on the CRF to do some trail riding. But if the group is in harmony and rides together well, then it's great fun. I regularly go out with a group from the Scottish Motorcycle Club which is always good – the sense of everyone in a group doing a skilled thing together is quite something. Small groups work best I think.

Sat nav or map?

I can read a map, though I'm capable of getting it 180 degrees out, so the sat nav is really empowering. Best of all, you can head



Above: Great scenery and quiet roads in Scotland
Left: With Tiffany Coates
Above Right: With husband Patrick

down a little road just to see where it goes and the sat nav will always take you back again. Far from being something which tells you where to go it also enables you to explore randomly. I love the hilliest and most windy routes mode, because it takes you places you would never have seen otherwise. I have a Tom Tom Rider 550 but I'm about to swap to a Garmin which will do off-road navigation as well, which is useful for me.

| Favourite place to ride?

Living in Scotland, there's so much on my doorstep. We have English bikers come up here who can't believe how empty the roads are. You get long, long stretches of quiet road at the national speed limit with no towns and villages, so you can just get into a nice flowing ride. And riding up a twisty hill road is just the best thing – Scotland has plenty of those.

| Best motorcycle moment?

It's a whole category. Motorcycling is the purest form of joy I've experienced. I don't get that every time I ride, but quite a bit, most often when I've ridden to the crest of a hill and a massive landscape opens up the other side. I love the skill and the physicality of riding, but really it's about moments like that – sheer joy.

| And the worst?

Probably the most miserable I've been on a bike was back in the '80s riding from Sydney to Melbourne to visit my family, 900km

away. On the second day it started raining about 100km out of Melbourne. I got soaked and by the time I reached the suburbs I was frozen. I arrived to find no one was at home and that they had changed the locks (not because of me...) so I couldn't get in! Shivering on the driveway, probably borderline hypothermia. That's why I'm now the queen of layers, so I'm always toasty – don't like being cold.

| You're involved in the Scottish Adventure Travel Film Festival?

An ATFF was held by National Trust for Scotland one year and Scotland is a good place for it so I thought it would be good to bring it back. It was quite a learning process to put on an event like that but I'm a bit of a skills junkie. It's 8th-10th July at Strathallan School.

| Tell us about Crieff Cloverleaf

It's a series of four beautiful and exciting all-day rides based in Crieff, heading north, south, east and west. Crieff is the base, so there's no need to repack every day. The idea came out of lockdown – the town depends quite a bit on tourist income, so it had suffered. Also, I've always found packing a bike is a pain, so why not plan a series of rides based on the same place? I worked out the routes and included lots of smaller single-track roads which would be a pain by car but are great on a bike.



The response from bikers has been fantastic, and many who came last year said they would come back and do it again in 2022 – I knew they would love it because I know what these roads are like. I'm not a marketing genius, but it's such good motorcycling country that you can't really go wrong.

There are lots of negative stereotypes about motorcyclists, and I want to help dispel them in our local community. It's great that so many friendly, responsible and interesting riders have been visiting, and doing a great job of being informal ambassadors for motorcycling!



Left: Crieff Cloverleaf aims to attract more bikers to mid-Scotland



Right: Kona has been keen to develop advanced riding

Below: And she flies a plane...

Women are still a minority in motorcycling – what's been your experience?

That's an interesting question. When I finally got a degree it was in robotics, digital technology and computer science and there certainly aren't many women doing that. So I've always worked in male-dominated fields and never felt as if that has held me back. Interestingly, I also used to write poetry and I found more assumptions about gender in that area than the others. Nothing gives me more pleasure now than giving motorcycle maintenance advice to men, and hats off to the ones willing to take it! I love confounding expectations, especially in the days when I had long hair. I'd take my helmet off and, 'Oh my God, it's a girl!'

What's motorcycling's biggest challenge?

I think one is demographics. Motorcyclists are an ageing group and we need to attract more young people into it. The other is alternative fuels. I would love to offer tours for electric motorbikes in Scotland, but until battery technology comes on, it more suits urban use. In Scotland you really do need your own transport to see things, because the distances are longer and there isn't enough public transport, so there's a tension there between that and promoting sustainable tourism. I think motorcycles have a part to play in that because they don't cause as much road damage or congestion as cars or camper vans.

What about advanced riding?

I've done a lot of off-road training which is really useful for your on-road skills, very confidence building. After that, tarmac seems like a very easy and forgiving surface to ride on! I did a women's track training day with California Superbike School, which was a good way to feel the envelope of the bike more, which obviously you can't do on the public road. On a track with a good surface and nothing coming the other way, you can really start to feel what the bike can do.

The best road training I would recommend is Tom Killeen at i2i Motorcycle Academy – his machine control courses are something every rider should do, the most transformative piece of training I've ever done – Tom has worked out what our

superstitions and anxieties are, so he's able to dispel the myths one by one. I had a real thing about U-turns, and after a session with Tom I was doing them with a couple of fingers. A motorcycle is actually a very stable thing, and if you don't get in its way, all will be well.

Biker Down is also well worth doing. I was out with a group of women riders and we went over Dukes Pass, which involves a set of really sharp hairpins. One of the riders was a novice and came off, but three of the women had been on Biker Down, so they immediately knew what to do. I've also just done a four-day course on leading riders off-road, which included first aid – presented by John Paul Dixon of MPower Training, for qualifications run by the Overland Guide Association. I'm keen to offer guided tours as well as the Cloverleaf routes. Any sort of training which increases your skills is a valuable thing.



Useful Links

Free Cloverleaf routes and links to bike-friendly B&Bs – www.cloverleaf.scot
 Adventure Travel Film Festival Scotland – www.atff.scot
 i2i Motorcycle Academy – i2imca.com/